

Comparative Literature: Major Schools and Approaches

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Abstract

This paper studies the evolution of Comparative Literature and analyses the major schools of Comparative Literature such as the French School, the American School, and the German School and discusses the discipline in the Indian context. It discusses the concepts such as influence, parallelism and intertextuality, while highlighting the importance of translation in cross-cultural literary studies.

Introduction

Comparative Study emerged as an independent discipline in the later part of the nineteenth century. It refers to the exploration of the literature of divergent countries as well as interdisciplinary research. In Europe, the comparative study of literature was based on different aspects with special emphasis on a particular aspect. As a result, different schools of the comparative study came into existence with different ways of comparing literatures and finding out similarities and dissimilarities. The comparative method is highly beneficial as it is possible only through comparison that one comes to know about oneself. It enables one to comprehend the attributes of literary figures based on nationality.

The Schools of Comparative Literature

According to the French scholars, comparative literature is that wing of literary study which explores corresponding interconnections between the literatures that are diverse in nature based on nation or language. Since, different nations have common historical connections, therefore, common cultural roots. They emphasized the historical consciousness. The study of influence was focused by the scholars because of which the school came to be known as “the school of influence”. The social, economic, historical, political, and cultural factors, up to a great extent, influence a creative writer. Under the influence of these factors, the expressions of writers apparently bear close affinities with other writers. Mazzini rightly says, “...there is no literature without any foreign influence. Even the most famous writers have purloined and even plagiarized the content of their writings. The close affinities can be found between the masterpieces when put under analysis in comparison” (qtd. in Dhawan 23-24).

Moreover, such influences were denounced as being ‘mechanical’ and the scholars more emphasized the facts regarding the works which a particular author read, the people whom s/he interacted with and how they influenced the author. The influencer (one who influences) got primary position whereas the influence (who is influenced) was not given much attention. The influences can be:

- **Direct or Indirect:** The direct influence happens when there is a direct or actual contact between the influencer and influence or the influence has direct access to the writer’s original works (influencer). The influence is said to be indirect when the influencer and influence have no direct contact because of the obstacles like language. They have intermediaries through which they contact- may be some

individual, magazines, periodicals, etc. It is also worth mention that translations play an important part in comparative studies of literature. They make the scope of Comparative literature wider as they enable a comparatist to understand the literature written in a language which s/he is not familiar with. But sometimes the translation diverges from the original text, shifting its essence and meaning to some other plane. The comparatist/ the reader is, therefore, misguided- which is termed as 'false influence'. It is, therefore, vital for a comparatist to be bilingual.

- **Literary and Non-Literary:** The influence may be literary or non-literary. In case of Comparative Literature, if the writings of an author are influenced by the works of some other author (irrespective of genre), it is called a literary influence whereas if the influence is influenced by some other factor like culture or language, the influence is known to be a non-literary influence. The non-literary influences are rejected by the French scholars.

The mechanical category of influence was later replaced by the reception, which holds that the receiver is more important as it depends entirely upon the receiver how s/he receives. Although 'reception' and 'influence' are interdependent, they are different concepts. No influence is possible if a literary work is not well received in a foreign nation. Even if the reception is proper, it never ensures a positive influence.

- **Imitation and Borrowing:** Ulrich Weisstein demarcates influence and imitation/borrowing. Imitation is the embracing of certain facets of a foreign work of literature and exhibiting them in one's work by modifying it following the palate of the readers. It involves the creative genius, whereas the writer is confined to the bona fide text like a translator in case of borrowing. Borrowing from the works of others without references or proper acknowledgment is called plagiarism.

The scholars like H. H. Remak and Rene` Wellek paved a fresh way and led the foundation of the American school of comparative literature, which came to be known as the school of parallel study in the mid-twentieth century. This school didn't follow the assumptions of the French school. They believed that the literature, which does not have any direct influence, can be compared with any other literature or other disciplines like painting, music, sociology, architecture, philosophy, etc. The pioneer of the American school, Henry Remak asserts that in spite of treating comparative literature as a discipline, it should be treated as a tool for liaison or what he believes, "connecting link between subjects or subject areas" (Remak 3). He entrusts the comparatist with the selection of basis of comparison without any nationalistic interference. This school differs from the French school in the point that the American scholars prefer the comparison of two or more literatures that do not have any head-on immediate influences and calls for the comparison of literature with other disciplines, making the comparative study inter-disciplinary. This school is also known as the school of parallel study. The school owes to the theory of New-criticism, according to which literature has to be autonomous, independent and full of artistic qualities. Comparative literature, according to the American school, is, therefore, interdisciplinary research. The chauvinistic nationalism which was in the air of the French school where linguistic and political bonds were considered paramount, American school believes that despite these differences, there are so many common things among different nations; "...the American perspective on comparative literature was based from the start on ideas of interdisciplinarity and universalism" (Bassnett 33).

American school establishes new ways of study such as 'parallelism' and 'intertextuality'.

- **Parallelism:** Ihab Hassan condemns the influence theory for its inaccuracy and faults as more than one factor might be responsible for influence. Moreover, there is no room for the reception of a work

if the people are not prepared mentally and culturally for absorbing the ideas and philosophies behind the works. Parallelism is, therefore, an alternative for the influence theory. There are many similarities in the social and historical evolution of mankind. The evolution of literature has been a harmonious process. A study using the theory of parallelism brings to focus the affinities among the works of literature belonging to different backgrounds because of the common historical and social evolution of humanity; any direct link between the works or writers might be missing.

- **Intertextuality:** The term ‘intertextuality’ was coined by Julia Kristeva for amalgamation of semiotics (a Saussurean concept referring to the derivation of the meaning of signs within a text) with dialogism and heteroglossia (Bakhtin's concepts). According to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, there is an unceasing dialogue with the other works and authors. ‘Heteroglossia’ refers to multiple meanings of a word in a work of literature. In simple words, ‘intertextuality is the reference in a text to another text, which can be in the form of allusion, quotation, parody or pastiche. It affects the manner of reading. The implications of the hypotext or the influencing text can be witnessed on the hypertext or the influenced text (the terms ‘hypertext’ and ‘hypotext’ are given by Gerard Genette). Intertextuality demands prior knowledge and understanding of the reader and adds depth to the text. John Fitzsimmons categorizes intertextuality into three types:
 - **Obligatory Intertextuality:** This type of Intertextuality involves the previous knowledge of the reader. One must have read the hypotext before understanding the hypertext. For instance, the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* demand the reader’s prior knowledge of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.
 - **Optional Intertextuality:** In this type, it is not at all essential for the reader to have prior knowledge of the hypotext. It is employed to pay homage to the original writers of the hypotext.
 - **Accidental Intertextuality:** When the writer has no intention but the reader connects the text s/he is reading to some prior experience or text.

Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author” says, “To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing” (Barthes 188) and argues that the writer and text are unrelated as the biographical details and authorial intentions are irrelevant in the interpretation of a text. He calls the writer “a scriptor”. There is nothing creative that a writer does, he only re-orders the existing ideas. He draws an analogy between text and textiles and remarks that a literary text has no sole meaning which he calls “theological”. A text is open to myriad interpretations as it is an amalgamation of disparate writings and out of these writings, none is authentic. A text is a patchwork of the material brought from numerous sources. Therefore, a writer is never original. He only moulds the already available material into shape of his choice.

The prime focus of the German school of comparative literature has always been the theme of work. The crux can be understood by deciphering the concept of ‘placing’, which means to place two literatures together so that they may shed light at each other. The works of literature are placed together to help in interpreting and understanding each other in a better way.

The Indian Context

India is famous for its unity in diversity and it is this unity in diversity that becomes the foundation of comparative literature in India. Indian literatures, although written in different regional languages, share a common historical and social backdrop.

Indian Comparative Literature Association (1981) declares that its objective is the formulation of the co-

concept of Indian Literature that would work towards the unveiling of the panache of Indian Literature. It would also unearth the greatness of Indian literature and its enterprise till date. The basic aim of comparative literature is to study the inter-relationships of literatures, demanding multi-dimensional and wider knowledge of the comparatist of various disciplines as comparative literature is inter-disciplinary in nature.

India is a land of diverse cultures and languages. Eighteen languages are considered by the Constitution of India as regional languages. The Sahitya Akademi (recognizing four other languages, making a total of 22 regional languages including Assamese, Bengali, Dogri, Indian English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Konkani, Kashmiri, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Punjabi, Rajasthani, Nepali, Oriya, Sindhi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu) gives awards on the basis of the contribution to literature. Except for these recognized languages, there are numerous regional languages in each state, which are even taught in the schools. The critics assert that the common backdrop of social, cultural and religious conditions provides 'unity' to this diversity. Language alone is not the provider of unity to the literatures but the factors mentioned above also play an essential role in rendering the same. Language is conditioned by the social, historical and cultural factors and its conditioning takes a long time, which is crucial to be analyzed in this context. Punjabi literature, for instance, is different from Bengali literature. It is not so just because of the linguistic differences but because of the divergent socio-historical milieu and cultural differences that come into force and the experiences of the writers in those particular situations find articulation in their works. This is, however, also true that human experiences are universal in nature and the experiences of the writers are more or less similar. For instance, the Bhakti movement finds an almost similar expression in many Indian literatures (Bengali, Punjabi, Hindi and so on). Moreover, the freedom struggle has been one of the prominent themes of Indian literatures in 19th century India in various genres including poetry and novel. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* deal with the theme of the partition of India. The caste system, untouchability, poor condition of women in the feudal system in India, etc. are some of the common themes shared by different writers.

Amiya Dev, an Indian scholar, highlights the trouble to call Indian literature as 'singular' i.e. Indian Literature or 'plural' i.e. Indian Literatures. In the article "Comparative Literature in India", he questions the problematic nature of Indian literature- "valid category" as "singular" or "plural". Sahitya Akademi also treats the writers of different languages equally for every writer is a writer irrespective of the language s/he chooses. Indian literatures are "plural". Dev questions the validity of Indian literature as a single category. The western ideologists believed Sanskrit literature to be Indian. But the scholars like William Jones were all praise for *Shakuntalam*. Even the motto of Sahitya Akademi says that Indian Literature is one although it is written in many different languages. This view was resisted with the assertion that India, being a country with myriad languages is a country with "literatures" and not a singular "literature". But his assertion leads to anxiety of dominance or what Dev calls it, "hegemonic apprehensions" that one literature, perhaps written in some major language will dominate the scene and the literature of "the smallest spoken languages" will be under threat.

Gurbhagat Singh in his article, "Differential Multilogue: Comparative Literature and National Literatures", discusses in detail the concept of "differential multilogue". Etymologically, differential refers to "having differences" and "multilogue" denotes the conversation of many with many. He argues against the idea of nationalist identity and therefore, a single Indian Literature. He rejects the French and American schools and Goethe's concept of World literature and demands the jollification of

dissimilarities. He believes that comparative literature is restricted to dialogue only and he advocated a multilogue and argues that logos or knowledge is always plural and never single. He does not want to sacrifice the individuality either but celebrate diversity. He further argues that if “Indian” becomes a general signifier for the Indian literatures, it would not require any deconstruction. Each work of literature encompasses a different historical viewpoint and it would not be justifiable to use a general signifier for the Indian literatures.

Another Indian writer of prominence, Aijaz Ahmad in the article, “Indian Literature: Notes Towards the Definition of a Category” objects to the unjustified categorization of Indian Literature. He argues that Indian literature can be classified and categorized but defining Indian Literature in itself is against its character.

Significance of Translation as a Tool

In India, translation is getting a prominent position these days. There can be many reasons behind giving a lot of significance to translation in India. If the literature of one language is translated to some other language, for instance, English, it becomes available to many readers across the world. If a work is translated into some other regional Indian language, it will be available to the readers with a different linguistic background. Moreover, if literature written in Indian languages is translated into English, it will become comparable to the English literature. The writers like Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin believe that there is not much difference between translation and original text.

Conclusion

Comparative Literature has evolved from the rigid, nationalistic and history-driven "school of influence" of the French scholars to the more expansive, interdisciplinary, and universalist "parallel studies" of the American school and the theme-focused approach of the German school. In the Indian context, Comparative Literature shifts from looking at foreign influences to navigating its own vast internal diversity. Across its various schools, Comparative Literature relies heavily upon translation as a tool to bridge the gaps between languages and to widen the analytical scope and understanding.

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